Hurricane Katrina:

The Challenge to Basic Science

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At the start of the hurricane season each year, the Basic Science Animal Care Department begins the process of preparing for the worst scenario. Water is saved in thirty gallons drums and CO_2 tanks are ordered in case it becomes necessary to sacrifice animals. When the weather service announces that a hurricane is threatening the Louisiana coast, the second phase of preparation begins. Investigators have to classify their animal colony in three categories. The first category is for animals that we will evacuate to Alexandria Animal Clinic, the second is for animals that will stay in the facility and that will be kept alive until the end, and the third is for those animals that in case of extreme emergency will be sacrificed.

When hurricane Katrina entered the Gulf of Mexico, we executed our emergency plan. On Saturday, August 27, one animal caretaker and 100 mice were evacuated to Alexandria, Louisiana; the rest of the colony, 1800 mice and 400 rats, stayed in New Orleans. Part of the emergency plan is that one animal caretaker will stay with me on the campus to take care of the animals and help me with other duties in the labs. For one of those odd reasons, the animal caretaker could not come on Sunday, August 28, 2005.

When Katrina arrived on Monday morning, I realized that I had to do all the work by myself. On Tuesday, August 30, I woke up at 6:00 a.m. to do a job that I had watched the animal caretakers do with such ease. When I opened the first mouse cage, the six small creatures inside the cage started jumping, trying to get out of the cage. It reminded me of popcorn popping up in the pan. It took me an eternity to change the first cage. Then I looked around me and saw 300 more cages that I had to change in that room. After I mentally did the calculations I realized that it would take me seven days to change all the cages, not to mention cleaning and washing cages, changing water bottles, swiping and mopping the rooms and many other tasks. On Wednesday, August 31, around 10:00AM, when the missing animal caretaker came in, I think I was never so happy to see anyone. Since that experience I have a new appreciation for the work that the animal caretakers do for us; they make their work look easy when in reality it is very hard.

All laboratories were able to resume full functioning within two weeks after the storm: all animals were accounted for, and all cell lines remained intact. The preservation of the animals and the basic research labs assured the continuation of translational research at Ochsner.

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